Ethics and research

Editorial

Ethics is a branch of moral philosophy concerned with the rational evaluation of right and wrong, justice and injustice, virtue and vice, good and bad, and related concepts and principles. The most common way of defining "ethics": norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

Health research has the potential to make a substantial impact on health practice and on the wellbeing of individuals. While clinical trials and drug research are central to the health research agenda, such studies have the potential to expose participants to significant risk, and therefore ethical review for the conduct of such studies is essential to protect research participants. Ethical considerations are important at all stages of research. Any research that involves human subjects is guided by the ethical principles detailed in the Belmont Report (1974). The Belmont Report describes the three basic principles in research involving human subjects: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The principle of respect for persons contains two important elements. First, that we must treat all persons as autonomous beings; and second, that we are required to protect persons with diminished autonomy. Beneficence requires that researchers weigh the cost-benefit to research participants. Beneficence mandates that researchers first do not harm study participants, and second, maximize benefits. Finally, the principle of justice in research requires that the benefits of research are fairly distributed, i.e., that groups of people that may benefit from the research are not denied it, and that research is not conducted on groups of people who may not benefit from it. There are several reasons why it is important to adhere to ethical norms in research. First, norms promote the aims of research, such as knowledge, truth, and avoidance of error. For example, prohibitions against fabricating, falsifying, or misrepresenting research data promote the truth and avoid error. Second, since research often involves a great deal of cooperation and coordination among many different people in different disciplines and institutions, ethical standards promote the values that are essential to collaborative work, such as trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness. For example, many ethical norms in research, such as guidelines for authorship, copyright and patenting policies, data sharing policies, and confidentiality rules in peer review, are designed to protect intellectual property interests while encouraging collaboration. Most researchers want to receive credit for their contributions and do not want to have their ideas stolen or disclosed prematurely. Third, many of the ethical norms help to ensure that researchers can be held accountable to the public. For instance, federal policies on research misconduct, conflicts of interest, the human subjects' protections, and animal care and use are necessary in order to make sure that researchers who are funded by public money can be held accountable to the public. Fourth, ethical norms in research also help to build public support for research. People are more likely to fund research project if they can trust the quality and integrity of research. Finally, many of the norms of research promote a variety of other important moral and social values, such as social responsibility, human rights, and animal welfare, compliance with the law, and health and safety. Ethical lapses in research can significantly harm human
and animal subjects, students, and the public.

There are six key principles of ethical research expected to be addressed, whenever applicable:

- Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity and quality.
- Research staff and subjects must be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved. Some variation is allowed in very specific and exceptional research contexts for which detailed guidance is provided in the policy Guidelines.
- The confidentiality of information supplied by research subjects and the anonymity of respondents must be respected.
- Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion.
- Harm to research participants must be avoided.
- The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.

Research with human subjects should be carried out only by, or strictly supervised by, suitably qualified and experienced investigators and in accordance with a protocol that clearly states: the aim of the research; the reasons for proposing that it involve human subjects; the nature and degree of any known risks to the subjects; the sources from which it is proposed to recruit subjects; and the means proposed for ensuring that subjects' consent will be adequately informed and voluntary. The protocol should be scientifically and ethically appraised by one or more suitably constituted review bodies, independent of the investigators.

Assistant prof of Psychiatry
Dr Sirwan K Ali
Associate Editor